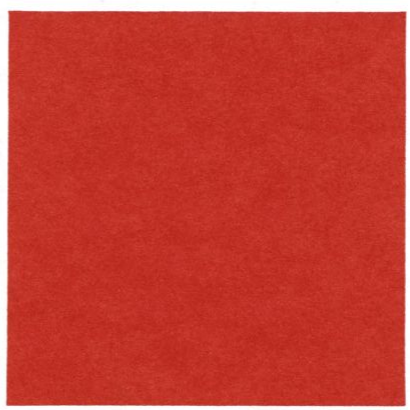
ABOUT 2



EL LISSITZKY

CHILDREN
TO ALL
TO ALL

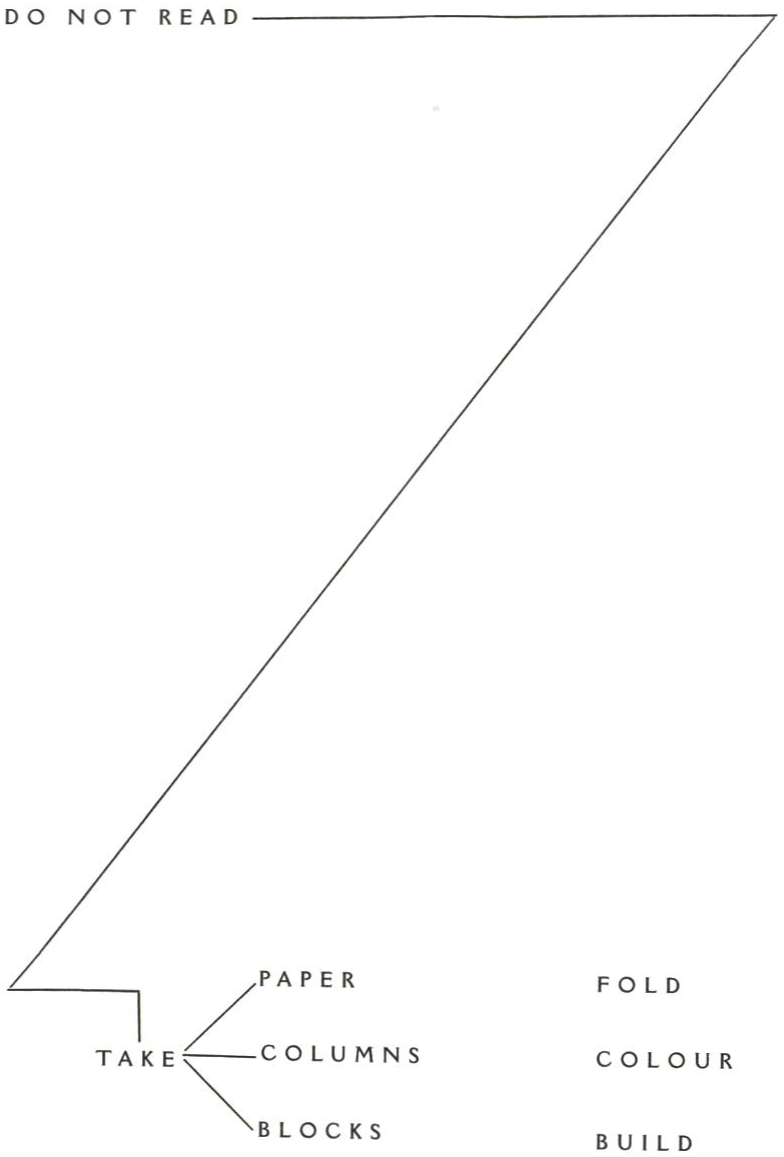
A TALE OF TWO SQUARES

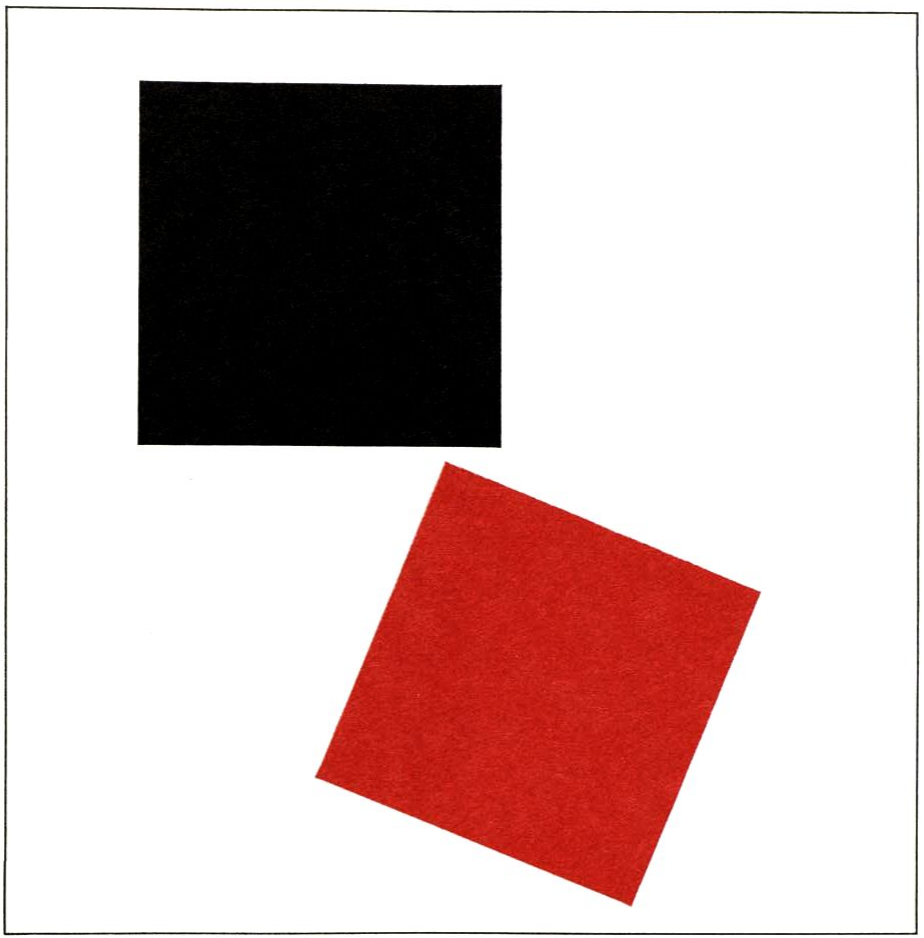
EL LISSITZKY

A SUPREMATIST

IN 6 CONSTRUCTIONS

2014
Tate Publishing


DO NOT READ
TAKE
PAPER
COLUMNS
BLOCKS
FOLD
COLOUR
BUILD



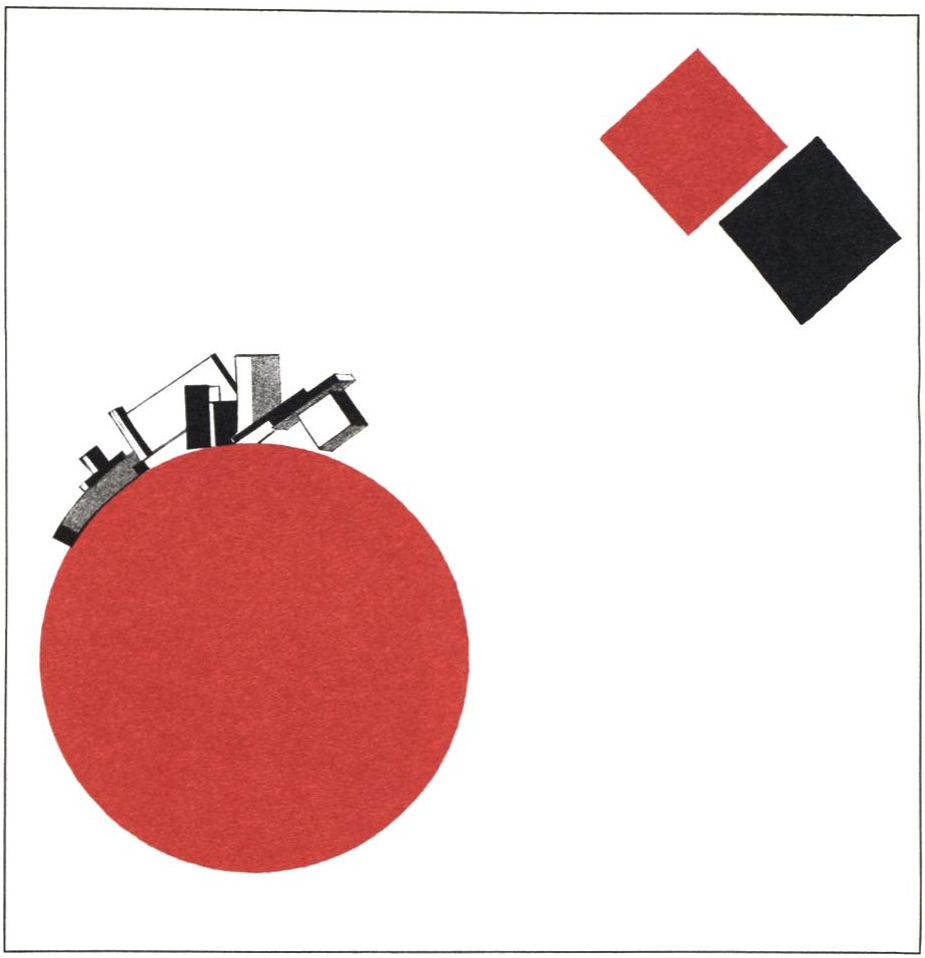
HERE ARE

TWO

SQU-

AR-

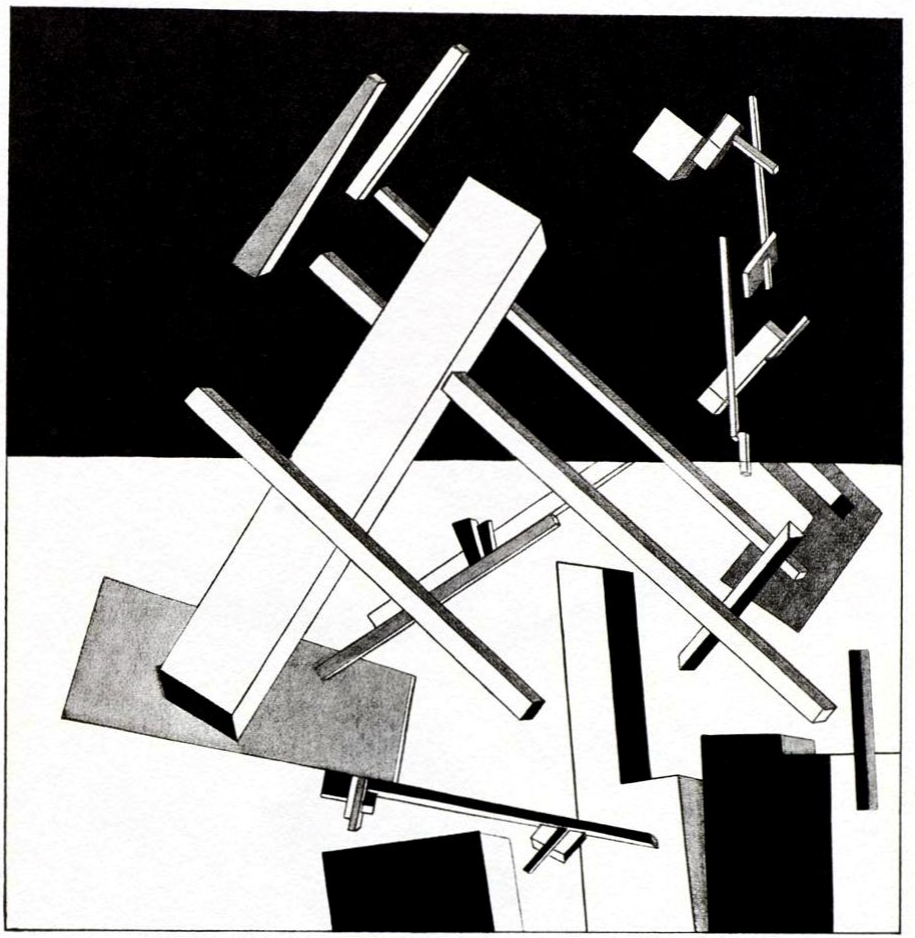
ES



THEY FLY TO THE EARTH

FROM FAR AWAY

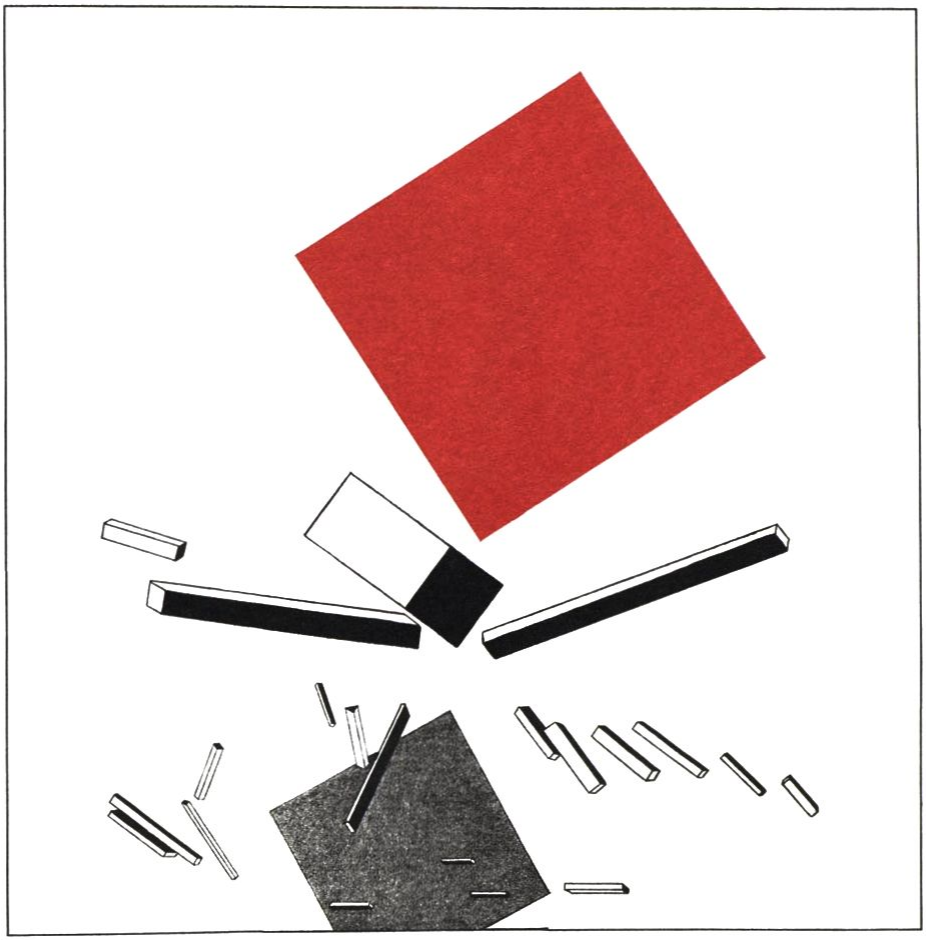
AND



AND

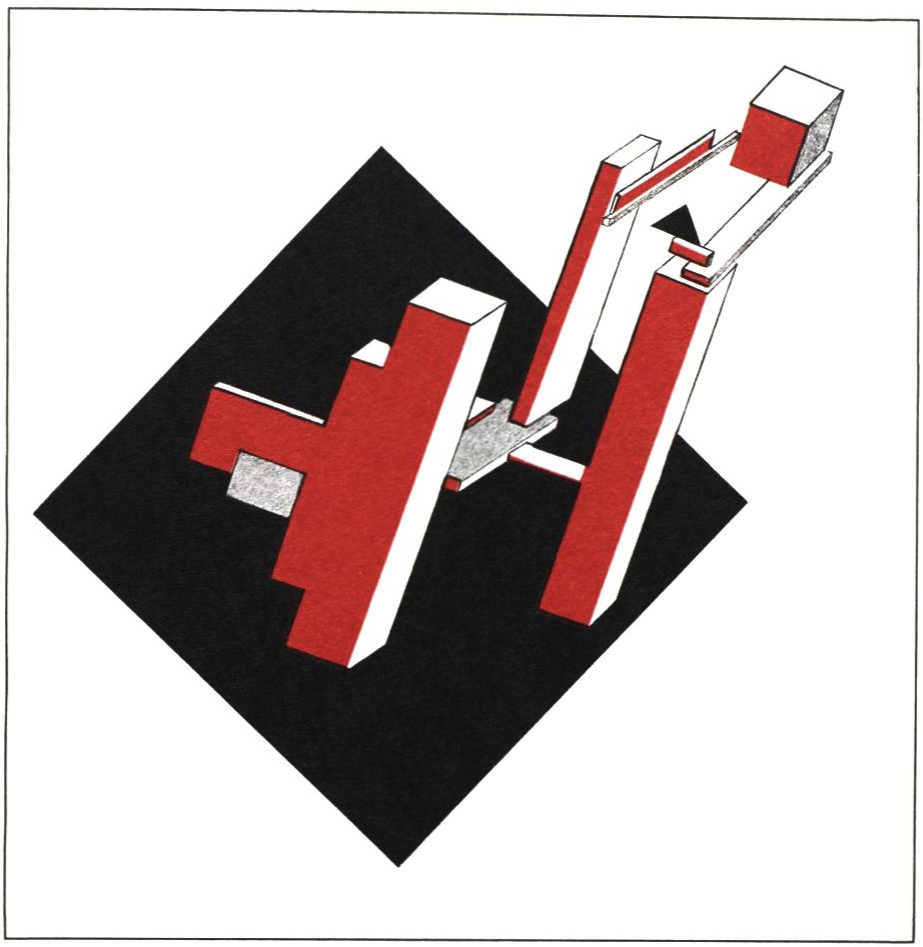
THEY SEE

A BLACK ALARMING



ONE STRIKE

EVERYTHING **IS SCATTERED**



AND ON THE BLACK

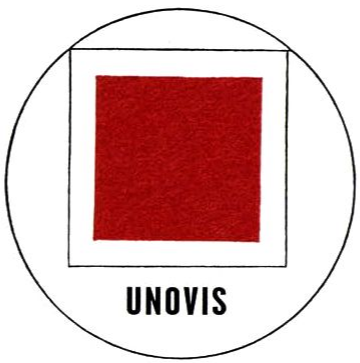
IS ESTABLISHED

the RED CLEARLY

Here

it is all over

and then



CONSTRUCTED
1920 VITEBSK

PUBLISHER'S NOTE – EL LISSITZKY (1890–1941) WAS ONE OF THE GREAT PIONEERS OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA, CHAMPIONING THE USE OF THE VISUAL ARTS TO INSTIGATE THE NEW ERA THAT WOULD FOLLOW IN THE WAKE OF THE OVERTHROW OF THE OLD REGIME. HE WAS NOT ALONE IN SEEING THE IMMENSE POTENTIAL OF THE CHILDREN'S BOOK AS A MEANS TO DISSEMINATE THE NEW ORDER (IN 1919 HE ARGUED THAT 'BOOKS HAVE BECOME THE MONUMENTS OF MODERNITY.'). ABOUT TWO SQUARES IS PERHAPS THE PRE-EMINENT EXAMPLE OF WHAT THIS COULD MEAN AND HAS SINCE BECOME A TOUCHSTONE FOR CHARTING THE HISTORY OF BOOK ILLUSTRATION IN THE MODERN ERA.

ITS SENSE OF A CLEAR, BOLD GRAPHIC THAT HOLDS NO PUNCHES AND RESPECTS THE INSIGHT AND VISUAL AWARENESS OF THE CHILD IS AS RELEVANT TODAY AS IT WAS ON ITS FIRST PUBLICATION IN 1922. INSPIRED BY THE SUPREMATIST VISION OF KASIMIR MALEVICH, HIS COLLEAGUE AT THE ART INSTITUTE IN VITEBSK, OF A NON-OBJECTIVE ART BASED ON THE PURITY OF GEOMETRIC FORMS, IN ABOUT TWO SQUARES HE COMMUNICATES THIS ON A COSMIC SCALE BY MEANS OF HIS CONSTRUCTIVIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE BOOK AS AN ARCHITECTURAL CONSTRUCTION. IT IS A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER, ROOTED IN ITS TIME AND PLACE BUT RESONATING AT A UNIVERSAL LEVEL.

ROGER THORP
2013 LONDON

Afterword

About Two Squares is the first 'visual book' for children. It is a multiple object designed as an animated cartoon film and a musical score for speech, which invites the reader to become its actor. The story is that of a future to be invented. Two heroes take on the mission of rebuilding the world. The proposed method is a construction set on the scale of the cosmos. From just the two dimensions of the page, ***About Two Squares*** puts the reader in a situation of weightlessness and offers a breathtaking journey through space and time.

It was a book of the future when published in 1922, and it remains fascinating today thanks to the impact of its six episodes, where everything is reduced to the necessary and the sufficient: two squares, two main high-contrast colours, a circle, a few parallelepipeds, and a text in telegraphic style, composed without linearity or punctuation. This short, unconventional treatise on typography and composition in six 'constructions', each condensed down to a single page without any pagination other than that created by the graphics, had the explicit aim of familiarising children of all ages with the most radical art of that period, **Suprematism**. This artistic movement, started by the Russian painter **Kasimir Malevich** (1878-1935), marked the end of figurative and decorative painting and advocated the supremacy of 'objectless' paintings. Indeed, the early twentieth century witnessed an exceptional questioning of art, related to technological and scientific advances (the development of photography and cinema, means of transport and communication, radio, telephone, early science fiction, the theory of relativity, non-Euclidean geometry, and so on), causing a disruption of perception and a rapprochement between science and art.

In Russia, the context of the 1917 revolution provided a marvellous opportunity for artists who wanted to rethink completely their social and cultural environment in the planned transformation of society at which they aimed. To imagine new realities, they needed a **new graphic language**; and the geometrization of forms that began with cubism became a source of inspiration.

Lazar Lissitzky (1890-1941), for whom the pair of compasses and the ruler were to replace the paintbrush, wrote in 1924 that 'modern art, like science, has reduced form to its basic elements'. He was interested in connecting technology and art, and said he admired the ornate door of a church as much as the paintings of the great masters.

An architect by training, he was also a pioneer in the fields of photography, design, and scenography, and he was particularly known in book design and typography. He mentioned, as a foundational experience for a **typographic art**, the fact that, aged thirteen, he and a friend had 'published' a revolutionary paper issued in two copies. Lazar Lissitzky later theorised his thoughts in several texts with significant titles such as: *Our Book, Typographical Facts, The Visual Text, Topography of Typography, Art and Pangeometry,* and *Art and Spaces.*

In 1923 he synthetised eight principles of this 'typographism' – or *tipografika*, a word he created in Russian – including the following: 'Printed words are not perceived by hearing but by sight,' and 'The sequence of pages is bioscopic.'. He concluded his list of postulates with an intuition of the advent of 'the electro-library', which assumes its full meaning today.

In the early years of the revolution the time had come for action; immediacy of perception was a priority in grabbing the attention of the many audiences that were still illiterate. Thought should be stated in a condensed form, in books as well as on posters: the text becomes a **megaphone**.

Lissitzky starts from the fact that letters are formed from horizontal, vertical, diagonal and curved segments, and breaks the established rules to build up the page as a whole ensemble in which 'the word is the illustration of the image', including its expression in sound. He makes an axiom of contrast: lines adopt a vertical and often a diagonal position to express dynamism, and the words are **scattered** across the page; a word can have three fonts, and each letter a different body. Transformed into a visual object, the book is constructed as a building in which volume and movement are represented. As a designer of exhibitions, El Lissitzky would even use walls, floor and ceiling, like the six faces of a cube.

This 'constructor' of books found himself at the crossroads of several influences, those of the Russian and European avant-gardes, but also those of the folk, religious and **calligraphic** art of Jewish culture, and the publication of ***About Two Squares*** was not his first book for children. From 1917 to 1922 he illustrated sixteen books on Yiddish culture, in a style close to that of the painter **Marc Chagall**, with whom he participated in the revival of such publications, which had suffered discrimination before the revolution. Lissitzky was already trying out some of his insights by combining texts with illustrations, and in 1919 he introduced **diagonals** into his compositions, as in *The Only Kid* (*Had-Gadya*).

In 1919 he left to teach at the Popular Art Institute created by Chagall in Vitebsk, where the arrival of Kasimir Malevich, in October of the same year, provoked a final artistic transformation in his work. In 1915 Malevich exhibited his first suprematist painting ***Black Square***. 'The black square is a royal child full of life. This is the first step of pure creation in art,' stated Malevich. For one group of young painters this would be a decisive **shock**, equivalent to the invention of zero in mathematics. Like an 'Open, sesame!' leading to an uncharted aesthetic universe, colour was brought to its highest intensity, and economy was imposed on form. Malevich soon replaced Chagall as head of the school, where on 14 February 1920, with El Lissitzky, he founded the group of Affirmers of the New Art, the UNOVIS. From 1920 onwards Lazar Lissitzky signed his works with the name **El Lissitzky**, reducing his first name to its initials, in accordance with the principles of maximum concision and expression, El being one of the names of God in Hebrew. For ***About Two Squares*** he created the publishing logo for UNOVIS, a red square in a black circle, itself surrounded by a black square mesh. The enthusiasm of the 'Unovists' was such that they wore a black square sewn onto their sleeves and signed their work with a black square. Their slogan was: 'Let the subversion of the old world of art be marked on the palms of your hands, and wear a black square as the principle of economy on a global level; in your workshops draw a red square as a sign of world revolution in the arts, and clear the surface of the earth of the incoherence that reigns on it.'

About Two Squares would be one of the first applications of Lissitzky's work, in parallel with a series of paintings, prints and drawings he called **Proun**, 'Project for the affirmation of the new'. These architectural prototypes, 'whose surfaces cease to be a picture and turn into a structure around which we must turn', placed geometric shapes in tension in space – as so many ideas for development. At a stage of mankind at which human beings have accomplished the dream of Icarus, nothing now seemed, in his view, impossible: 'We are the witnesses of inventions which only yesterday seemed utopian,' he wrote in 1922. So it was with the hitherto unimaginable view of the earth seen from an aeroplane.

This was the context in which El Lissitzky designed ***About Two Squares***. 'In this amazing story, I set myself the goal of giving shape to a simple idea, using the most basic ways to encourage children to play actively and provide adults with a spectacle. The action unfolds like a film. The words are placed within force fields structured by the protagonists – the squares. General and specific plastic sequences needed to be given a typographical embodiment.' El Lissitzky organised the synthesis of image and text by exploiting all the most daring visual possibilities. He later said that if an author is the poet of the text, his ambition was to be the **poet** of layout; and in ***About Two Squares*** he was not only the author and illustrator, but also the designer and the layout artist, responsible for the overall page setting. He completely drew and coloured by hand the document for printing, since there was no typographical technique that could be adapted to his experiments in Russia during the civil war. The publication of this manifesto-book was announced in 1920 in the first issue of the UNOVIS bulletin, the *Almanac*, but it would take two years before it was finally printed, in Germany in April 1922 by Russian publishers who had fled to Berlin, which was both a magnet for Russian émigré intellectuals and also – with the Bauhaus – a crucible of artistic innovation. This book would have an immediate impact in the European art world with its publication in the avant-garde review ***De Stijl***, founded in 1917 in the Netherlands by the artist and architect **Theo van Doesburg**, a professor at the Bauhaus.

In 1928 El Lissitzky would develop an educational book for children (it did not find a publisher) on the *Four Arithmetic Operations*, where he used letters as characters, this time anchored in the temporal reality of the Soviet era, with *kholkoz* farmers, workers, and Red Army soldiers. El Lissitzky's conclusion again urges its readers to be active: 'You can see that it is possible to carry out all kinds of operations on the basis of letters: now you try!', just as he had issued the humorous injunction in ***About Two Squares***: 'Do not read... build'!

The aim of children's books at this time was to create foundational myths replacing the old mythologies of the world's creation. ***About Two Squares***, therefore, is not a story but the epic of two components necessary to free a world that is now multidimensional from a past that is considered to have been negative, chaotic and oppressive. El Lissitzky believed that artists of his generation were 'summoned to make a new beginning in the history of mankind'. Beyond the many interpretations that this book raises, both political and artistic, the work does not, however, offer a clear answer, as for El Lissitzky, any work is 'a temporary stop on the road of becoming, and not the final goal'. **Thus**, on the last page, the black square heads away into space: will the red, hovering on the earth, follow? If ***About Two Squares*** implicitly reflects the encounter and the evolution of artistic itineraries, with Malevich subsequently looking more 'to the sky' and El Lissitzky 'to the earth', the message of this enigmatic book, as announced on its cover in the form of a rebus, remains open, as El Lissitzky intended. His message is that cooperation **energises** people and connects them to each other: yes, the red square will continue on its adventure, as shown by the wavy grey lines, and will join the black square. Everyone needs to participate in the task of constantly reinventing the world and projecting themselves into the future, since the cosmos is, now more than ever, a space-time to be dreamt into existence. The last words, '**and then**', propel the reader into the future, in line with El Lissitzky's conception of the book's function: 'Trains, cars, and planes carry our bodies around in space, while books activate our ideas in time'.

In 1926, Lissitzky wrote that ***About Two Squares*** 'is fast becoming the most monumental work of art; no longer is it an object caressed exclusively by the delicate hands of a few bibliophiles. [...] Through reading, our children are going to acquire a new visual language; they are growing up with a different relationship to the world and space, to form and colour; they will certainly create another book.' Designed without specific aesthetic concessions for children, this unique suprematist book is an essential pointer towards modern art. It is a rare act of **trust** in childhood.

Odile Belkeddar
Co-founder of Les Trois Ourses
The non-profit organization Les Trois Ourses (The Three Bears) focuses on the artistic education of children by putting 'the book at the centre'.